

HEART THROBS IN VEGAS

by Michael Ventura

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My dictionary defines "throb" as "to pulsate or pound, esp. with abnormal force or rapidity." Exactly what my heart was doing.

I was in Vegas, on the 19th floor of the Rio... A room in which the entire wall is your window... Lighting a cigarette, taking a puff, putting it out (my heart throbbed harder with even one drag)... Not knowing yet that it was "electrolyte imbalance" caused by extreme heat (104 F at midnight) that had jolted my heart... Wondering at its rhythms: a pounding that would shake my whole frame, then no beat for moments, then a fluttering of beats hardly felt, then more pounding, while I tried to breathe evenly and sit quite still... Then wanting another cigarette, and laughing at God: "You gonna kill me for a lousy puff? Seems hardly fair, but have it Your way--You always do..." Taking the puff, as a kind of game, a dare (electrolyte imbalance impairs the judgment, they say--but what's my excuse most days?)... And Las Vegas spread before me, the pastel patterns of the Stardust's neon, the bright cacophony of the Riviera's, the huge white skull of Treasure Island, "Alas, poor Michael, I knew that fool well--or thought I did..." The lavender of Circus Circus, the gold of the Mirage... And millions of small glittery lights, as though this weren't the harshest of lands and the most brutal of cities, but a lake reflecting the desert sky...

Couldn't sleep. My heart shook my body so hard it jolted me awake. It would be days before my friend Elliot (a doctor) would explain about electrolytes and tell me to guzzle Gatorade to steady my heart. Sickly sweet Gatorade, of all things. (He said that once you get to this point, just drinking quarts of water, as I was doing, wasn't enough.) He told me this is one way heat kills: congestive heart failure due to lack of electrolytes caused by dehydration. But such knowledge was for later; in that room, I was after another kind of knowledge.

There is fear and there is terror. They are not at all the same. I see now that I was sitting there (when I might have been calling 911 or somebody) out of some imperative to break through the terror. The fear seemed inevitable, the terror insupportable. It had always been insupportable, so why had I supported it? Long ago I'd learned the arts of hiding it; still, it had been with me all my life. More than a terror of death, it was a terror of everything, a terror that merely showed its face most starkly in the presence of a death. Had I been born with it? Had my childhood instilled it? Those questions didn't matter anymore. Thinking about it had been useless. What mattered was that I'd had enough. Had there ever been a morning I'd wakened with no terror? I wanted, for once, to stare the terror down and make it leave my body. Perhaps it wouldn't leave that room, or any room I would ever enter, but I wanted it finally to leave my body.

To do this I had no tricks and no words. My heart had begun a terrible irregular pounding, and my instinct was to sit and feel it and face it. I don't present this as, for want of a better word, a lesson. (Never take such a lesson from someone whose eyes you haven't looked into.) I present it only as an experience which began spontaneously in one moment; that moment led to the next and the next; till gradually, as the sun rose over Vegas, I understood what I was up to. I was betting my life against my terror. I was sick

of my terror of death (which had meant a terror of life, don't you think?) and I was sitting with it. If I sat with it long enough, with death near, maybe the terror would somehow leave. I didn't know what else to do.

Oddly, not-knowing was my only refuge. My heart would beat, then stop, then start, in rhythms impossible to chart. The terror would rise and fall. I would wait, and try not to fill the waiting with attempting to know what I didn't know.

After a long while, into that space of not-knowing something entered: I had the sensation that I was sitting beside myself, holding my own hand. A verse of Ikkyu, a 15th-century monk who called himself "Crazy Cloud," rose in me: you can't be anyone but you/therefore you are that Other one you love. I knew what was holding my hand.

My life was holding my hand. My life was my friend, while I was... me. We were not quite the same. We held hands. I know it doesn't sound rational, but the feeling was strong: There was my life, who was my friend, and there was me. If my life let go my hand, I would be what people call "dead"--but even then my life would be watching, and it would be all right. Because one day your life must let go your hand. Nothing can stop or change that. So I waited to see if it would let go now, and somehow this act of waiting let me feel and know this stranger and friend, my life.

We had met before, obviously. But if we'd really accepted each other, would terror have accompanied me every day?

The experience was: Because of the presence of death--because I could not resist the impulse to withstand and stare down my terror--my life became my friend. It had always been my friend, I realized. A difficult friend, a friend I'd sometimes not spoken to, sometimes betrayed, sometimes forgiven, and sometimes it forgave me, but still: my friend. Stronger than I, somehow. Watching my antics with astounding tolerance. Trying to get through to me. Not with any particular message, but with something more: a kind of acceptance. I don't know how to name it except to say, my life, no matter what it does, is my friend--and I, no matter what I do, am its friend. Now there are times with others when I pause, see their life beside them, and wonder if they know they are accompanied by a friend.

See, a while ago I realized I had to forgive my life. Not just forgive myself, but forgive my life. All of it. Maybe that's when those moments at the Rio really began. As though when I forgave my life, it knew (though I didn't yet) that it was my friend. Perhaps then it was only a matter of time before it would become palpable and hold my hand.

This may be why, when the terror shook me and I really thought I would die, I had no impulse to call anyone. That would have only frightened people, and what could they have said? The same thing I would have said if I got such a call: "Go to a fucking doctor right now." If I was dying there were no goodbyes to say. ("Goodbye" is so feeble, and no one ever really means it.) Nothing that had been wrong could be made right. And there was nothing to resolve--the heart is too complex, it laughs at attempts at resolution. Or hides. (Soon will come another overwhelming moment that shatters all supposed resolutions.) As for being comforted--Zelda Fitzgerald wrote to Scott, from her perch in a mental ward, "Don't look for comfort, there isn't any; and if there was, life would be a baby affair." (Yes, I trust that tortured woman more than I do most philosophers and literary lions. They play for prestige and she played for keeps.) So...

Sitting in a Vegas hotel room beside my life, my friend, which was me yet not-me, while my heart pounded, stopped, pounded--the fear never left (the body does not want to die, however reckless the spirit may be), but the terror found this question unanswerable: "If my life is my friend, then isn't my death also my friend? Hasn't my death given me this night of extraordinary life?"

The question shocked me. Somewhere in the reverberations of that shock, sometime the next night, the terror left.

A woman I know asked Carlos Castaneda how she could develop a spiritual life. He said, "Sometime each day, sit down and remember that you are going to die. You'll develop a spiritual life." When this was told to me, months after those nights in Vegas last summer, I laughed. (The truth makes you laugh sometimes, like a joke.) He was saying that her death is her friend, and that if she sat with that friend, it would teach her something every day. That's how good a friend one's death really is.

Now, when things of the day get too upsetting, I consult my friend--my death. Its presence has a way of putting anything in perspective.

On the second or third night, I forget which... when the lights of Las Vegas had become like an inner landscape to me, as though I were projecting them myself... and the great murderous desert that surrounds the city had become for me what it really always was, an immensely strong being that invites our greatest extremes to enact themselves... the terror left my body. Because life, my life, with all its failures and contradictions and paradoxes, had held my hand. I can't explain it, but that's how it was. I drove back to L.A. Got the medical attention I needed. My death had visited, and I flatter myself that, after so many years of being met as an enemy, it was a little surprised to be treated like a guest.

This was months ago. I'm as silly as ever, but the terror hasn't returned. It's still in the room, but my body is free of it. I no longer awake with it. My heart occasionally misses a beat and pounds harder. The specialist said not to worry about that and I don't. It isn't important to me to live a long time now that I know my life is my friend. I will not die alone, for something that is me and that is not me has always held my hand.

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